VOICES

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Scripture
~~Psalm 29~~
1 Samuel 3:1-10
Mark 1:9-11 & Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

I began my pilgrimage through theological education with ~~this~~ 2 simple assumptions - having faith meant having answers, and having a call to ministry meant having personal experience which in some way confirmed the answers as true; experiences which in some way could be evoked when people asked, (as they still do,) ["~~When~~ why did you decide to be a minister?"] - experiences which, at the very least, would provide personal solace and comfort when at the end of the day one asks oneself, ("What in the world am I doing in this business?")

And so I went to Divinity School expectantly - assuming that just as the Medical School taught eager students to dissect, diagnose and operate,

and just as the Law School would teach eager students to research, organize and argue a case, so my faculty would reveal to me the answer to my particular puzzle. The school was smugly unconcerned with anything as prosaic as say, how to preach a sermon, or run a meeting, or conduct a funeral, so I felt fairly safe in my assumption that what I would get out of the experience was contact, at least, with people who knew.

What a trauma to discover professors telling me that God is in the questions, the search, the pursuit of truth, beauty and meaning, that the only evidence I needed for God was a sense of my own hunger for God. ~~that simplicity was suspect - particularly [illegible] simple answers to the tough questions.~~ It was liberating in a sense, but also traumatic and ~~It was traumatic - but also liberating. Yet~~ I continue to suspect that deep in the heart of many of us is the inclination that religious faith is having some answers we are sure of. I continue to suspect that for many, if not most of us,

verifiable, objective, describable + sharable - which is what our evangelical friends are always urging us to do with our experiences of God - for most of us our experiences of God are pretty rare or pretty thin or both - and we feel pretty anemic when in the same room with a theologically muscular evangelical who knows what he/she believes and can nail it down with an experience that sounds plausible.

Oh, for a voice in the night. Oh, for a single, solitary experience that will tell us we were right to come to this place and learn Greek syntax and the nuances of Nicea and Chalcedon.

Well, I never heard one. And I've almost given up hoping for one. What I got instead was a Lutheran theologian by the name of Joseph Sittler who said:

> "We are tempted - to hang the reality of God, the compass of God's demands, the scope of Biblical and theological meaning on a febrile nail: the warmth and immediacy of a feeling of blessed assurance."

[Grace Notes and Other Fragments, p. 48]

My lusting after a voice - an experience to confirm my theological inclinations - a sin? even?

Sittler said -

"I have not seen any burning bushes. John Wesley's strangely warmed heart at Aldersgate Street - this is not my street. I have not the possibility to say of the Christian faith what many honest persons have said about it. But I have come to see that to declare as a gift of God that which I do not fully possess is, nevertheless, a duty of obedience."

And that, I would submit, is a good entree to a Biblical incident which is both charming and profoundly disturbing.

It is a 3,000 year old story. It is about an elderly couple, Elkanah and Hannah who, to their great surprise and delight, discover that they are going to have a baby. They are so happy they promise to give their baby to God.

So when the child, Samuel, is twelve, Hannah

and Elkanah make good on their promise and take him to an old priest, Eli, who presides over a sanctuary - or sacred shrine at-Shiloh. They give Samuel to Eli, and it is there and then that Samuel hears the voice.

The voice comes at night. Samuel and Eli are sleeping. Samuel thinks it is Eli calling. He wakes Eli and asks what he wants. Eli thinks Samuel is dreaming and sends him back to bed. It happens several times. What I love most about the story is that three times Samuel mistakes the voice for Eli. It doesn't sound like God - it sounds like the old priest. And Eli does exactly what you and I would do under the circumstances. He sends Samuel back to bed. It's fairly standard procedure, I should think, that if a child is standing beside your bed at two a.m. shaking you awake to tell you he's heard a voice, you assure him that there is no voice, everything is okay, pat him, hug him, send him for a drink and then back to bed so everyone can get some sleep. And if it

keeps happening all night long, his shaking you awake and insisting: "But I do hear it - I keep hearing the voice," you and I would do exactly what old Eli did. Turning over and pulling the covers up over his head... "All right - all right! You heard a voice. Next time you hear it, stay there, see what happens next - listen. Tell me about it in the morning."

Whatever happened that night, out of it came Israel's first prophet: the man who would embody the soul of the people, who would help them choose their first King when the time came, who would anoint Saul and would shape history - all of history.

It's a great, charming story. But it is a disturbing story too - because we haven't heard a voice like that, and the life of faith would be a lot simpler if we did. ~~Having faith would be so much easier if our own "internal dimensions" were a little more ample... or so we think.~~

Why no voices? Are we unworthy? Is God dumb? Or are we deaf? Or are we listening in the wrong places?

One of the oldest and most intriguing ideas

in the Bible is that if you listen to the world, you will hear the voice of God. The Times travel section last week carried a delightful little essay, "To Seacoasts, With Love." I find articles with titles like that peculiarly irresistible in January. The writer told how he loves nothing so much as a walk on the beach in the middle of a storm. And I recalled that long ago I began the practice, always, without exception, of walking out to the ocean - when we are there in the summer - early, preferably before the sun comes up, to look and to listen. And then several summers ago - sitting down on the deck looking and listening and reading - I discovered Psalm 29, and the reason I always do that: "The voice of the Lord is upon the waters."

"Listen," Eli told Samuel, and I suggest that when we listen, what we hear is the voice of the Lord. Now there is an old and venerable and continuing debate among theologians about how much of God you can know by listening to the world.

"All you need," say some, known as Pantheists. God is the world. The world is in God. God is the world. The world is God. Others say... "nothing of God is known through nature. Nature is neutral, often cruel, beautiful by accident."

What the Bible seems to say is that "The heavens are telling the glory of God... The voice of the Lord is upon the waters."

It isn't the whole story. God speaks through people and events in history and supremely in the life of a man named Jesus. But for those who can hear – the voice of God is also heard in the world. And it might be a good starting point for those of us who have not yet heard voices.

~~"Listen," Eli said, and for us even that is no~~ We assume, for instance, that when it comes to religion, we ought to keep talking. Remember... We think religion means having answers, not asking questions. So logically, praying means talking. Being quiet and

listening is sometimes excruciatingly painful. Presbyterians + Lutherans find a Quaker meeting uncomfortable. Thirty seconds of complete silence in a worship service will make us squirm. But there is a whole tradition of spirituality which teaches that "listening" is a spiritual discipline at least as important as speaking; that prayer is the act of first discerning the presence of God, listening to God's voice, or remaining silent before God.

"Listen," Eli advised Samuel. It is a discipline. It is a ministry, Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said: the ministry of listening to each other. Physicians keep telling us that the greatest single demand and the most difficult for them to meet, is the need of people for someone to listen to them.

So - to those who have not heard a voice, or had a personal experience with the reality and immediacy of God, the first word is "try listening. Stop talking for a while and listen... Listen to the world - listen to other people." And the

second word here is that the voice of God may not always be precise, or what we are listening for. The ancient story, after all, is very clear. God is speaking to Samuel, but Samuel doesn't recognize it as God's voice.

That is very good news. Joseph Sittler helped me by teaching me that the experiences don't happen with the same clarity and precision and intensity for everyone. It's not that other people don't have them: it's just that they don't happen with the same intensity - or we all don't experience them the same. I think we need to hear that. ~~Because I think we have become convinced that if our religious experience isn't emotionally shattering and documentable - we haven't had one.~~ I think we have accepted the definition of conversion as a radical, one time, profound upheaval... If you haven't felt it deeply, dramatically - if you haven't heard it clearly - if you haven't heard a voice calling your name - it isn't real. Well, things are a lot clearer in

retrospect, I have discovered in my own life. And Sittler helped me see that it is that way for most of us: that when Moses saw a burning bush in the desert, he was probably scared and probably looked around for bucket of water to put it out. The theological content was not altogether clear at the moment.

John Mulder, ~~president of Louisville~~ Seminary, ~~son of this conversation~~, said in a convocation address ~~after moving to Louisville from~~ Princeton: "The experience was frustrating but it revealed to me again the curious and wonderful mystery of how God calls us. It is a rare call that resounds with clarion simplicity."

That has been my experience and I believe it is the experience of most of us. God's voice is not demanding, loud, harsh, precise; but soft, easily missed, often sounding unclear at the time. We are free not to hear it, to ignore it, or to disregard it.

The basic assertion of the Christian faith is

that God has spoken most clearly in Jesus Christ. God's voice is heard in the life of that man: in his words, but also his deeds - his teaching, his healing, his loving and forgiving. God's Word became flesh in him. The word we hear in the world and in the voices of other people - that word became flesh in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. God's voice, we believe and on occasion experience, is an assurance - a reminder that we are not alone. And sometimes it is judgment; sometimes it is a voice of angry impatience; and sometimes, always, in fact, it is a bidding, an invitation to trust, to commit, to follow.

That voice will not demand. It will not intrude. It will be persistent because God will never give up on you, but it will not violate your freedom to ignore it. And you will have to listen - carefully - in order to hear.

So, I invite you to do that. Listen for God's voice. If you have never heard it - listen.

Near end of Alphabet of Grace

Frederick Buechner describes his own sense of vocation in a wonderful paragraph..

"I hear you are entering the ministry," the woman said down the long table, meaning no real harm. "Was it your own idea or were you poorly advised?" And the answer that she could not have heard even if I had given it was that it was not an idea at all, neither my own nor anyone else's. It was a lump in the throat. It was an itch-

ing in the feet. It was a stirring in the blood at the sound of rain. It was a sickening of the heart at the sight of misery. It was a clamoring of ghosts. It was a name which, when I wrote it out in a dream, I knew was a name worth dying for even if I was not brave enough to do the dying myself and could not even name the name for sure. Come unto me, all ye who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you a high and driving peace. I will condemn you to death.

That voice will not demand. It will not intrude. It will be persistent because God will never give up on you, but it will not violate your freedom to ignore it. And you will have to listen - carefully - in order to hear.

So, I invite you to do that. Listen for God's voice. If you have never heard it - listen.

It may never come with the precision you wish, or expect or hope for... no matter - listen.

~~"The voice of the Lord is upon the water," the Psalmist promised~~...

~~And~~ as... 'If the voice calls you - listen - say, 'speak Lord, for ~~thy servant hears~~ '"

~~Amen.~~

"

You are my son -
You are my daughter
I am well pleased
with you - is what ~~the~~ You
may hear Voice may saying..

old El. to Samuel — and to
us — [if the voice calls you - listen:-
'speak Lord, for thy servant
hears. A